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ABSTRACT

The successes and challenges of the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) Workplace Literacy Project in Virginia are described in this evaluation report. REEP's federal Workplace Literacy Project Consortium is operated as a special project within the Department of Adult, Career and Vocational Education of the Arlington Public Schools. The project offered job-related instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL), literacy, and basic skills to 696 students at various sites, including office buildings, nursing homes, convenience stores, hotels/motels, and hospitals. Participants also had access to a technology-based learning center. Employees attended 1 or 2 cycles of 60-hour English and literacy instruction. Innovative features of the REEP project include the following: joint recruiting efforts by industry and REEP; consortium approach; range of industries served; combination of on-site classes and learning center involvement; and cable television usage. Retention rates ranged from 100 percent in hospitals to 77 percent in nursing homes; pre- and post-test progress reports indicated that both supervisors and students considered the program a success. REEP strengths include strong partnerships, use of effective feedback, and design of a comprehensive curriculum framework. Ongoing challenges perceived by industry include on-going problems with foreign-born employees (e.g., failure to ask for clarification, inadequate understanding of forms/schedules and safety procedures, and lack of preparation for the workplace of the future) and the need for strong industry involvement. Learner and industry responses to the project are summarized. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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OUTSIDE EVALUATION REPORT

for the

Arlington Federal Workplace Literacy Project

submitted by

Heide Spruck Wrigley

Southport Institute for Policy Analysis

May 1993

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OUTSIDE EVALUATION REPORT

PURPOSE: This evaluation report presents information to the Department of Education regarding the successes the REEP Workplace Literacy Project has experienced and the challenges it has faced. It also shows how this particular project fits into the larger national picture of workplace literacy education for language minority adults. This outside evaluation report should be seen as a companion to the final report by the project in which a detailed description of the program context, implementation and outcomes is provided.

INFORMATION SOURCES: This evaluator took over the role of the final evaluator, Dr. Peters whose other commitments kept him from completing the evaluation. This report is the result of two kinds of evaluation activities: an examination of project documents (previous evaluations, assessments, curriculum materials, project final report) and a two and a half day site visit.

The site visit included discussions with project staff (the director, coordinator and teachers), as well as focus groups with selected learners and with industry representatives. Given time and cost constraints, as well as scheduling difficulties, it was not possible to interview all learners, nor was it possible to observe classes or talk to first-line supervisors and site managers. These shortcomings will be remedied in future evaluations.

QUALITY OF THE PROJECT: The Arlington Workplace Education Project is one of the most professionally run ESL workplace literacy programs that I have encountered. The program is extremely well managed, due in part to the long standing expertise of district staff in providing employment related language training to immigrants and refugees. Both the director and the coordinator have a sound knowledge of ESL workplace literacy issues and show a strong commitment to making the project work in spite of the difficulties inherent in providing educational services to industry. The teaching staff, as well, clearly care a great deal about the employees that they teach, although they may occasionally chafe under the burden of needing to provide quality education under less than ideal circumstances.

As evidenced by discussions with selected stakeholders and as documented in the project final report, the project was a full success. The program has done an excellent job in helping participating industries understand the challenges inherent in communicating across languages and has provided the employees of these industries with the skills and strategies necessary for interacting more effectively in English.

Industry representatives, interviewed in focus groups, are universally supportive of the workplace literacy program and would like to see its efforts continue. Although aware of the results the program has achieved, managers cited additional communication skills difficulties that their foreign-born employees encounter. This suggests that ongoing language and literacy

classes along with cross-cultural communication workshops and diversity training constitutes an unmet need. From the perspective of industry, additional courses, perhaps developed jointly by industry and ESL specialists are needed if employees are to gain the kind of high level English proficiency required for smooth customer relations, effective on-the-job communication, and employee advancement and promotion.

The employees interviewed regarded the program as useful and worthwhile, as well. Those who had not been able to communicate in English before the class started, felt most strongly that ongoing English training was needed so that they could become fluent in English. In offering short term English classes to this group, the program made it possible for employees to acquire basic job related English skills and provided them with an opportunity to use English in a safe environment. The confidence employees have gained in their own ability to communicate ideas in English, will help them to develop their English skills further.

Efforts to communicate with this group made it clear that many more hours of English language development are needed before participants who speak little English will be able to communicate effectively with customers or engage in joint problem solving with coworkers and supervisors who speak only English.

CONTEXT: REEP's federal Workplace Literacy Project Consortium is operated by the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP), a special project within the Department of Adult, Career and Vocational Education of Arlington Public Schools in Virginia. As part of a consortium that brings together educators, chambers of commerce, trade associations, and individual businesses, REEP has developed a workplace literacy project that offers both on-site classes and access to a technology-based learning center housed at Wilson School in Arlington. The project included a variety of sites, including office and grounds maintenance, nursing homes, convenience stores (7-11), hotels and motels, as well as hospitals.

The project has provided job-related instruction in English as a Second Language, literacy, and basic skills at various sites, including office buildings, nursing homes, convenience stores (7-11), hospitals, and hotels. The Adult Learning Center, a multi-media language center is used by learners who want to continue their studies after a class or merely want to upgrade their job-related language and literacy skills. On-site instructors also teach at the Learning Center to provide continuity and offer support for learners new to technology and independent learning.

During the grant period, the project has served 696 students, 424 in work site classes and 272 in the Adult Learning Center, significantly exceeding its goal of serving 250 students in classes and 150 in the center. Employees attended one or two cycles of job related English language and literacy instruction, with each cycle consisting of 60 in-class hours). The most popular classes offered were those designed for students with very little fluency in English, but advanced courses for employees who have higher level of proficiency were provided, as well. Recognizing that 60 or even 120 hours of instruction are not enough to move adults

with little English to full proficiency, the project tries to act as a catalyst or stepping stone to ongoing language and literacy development. Employees who are already somewhat proficient in English, are taught the professional English needed for more effective on-the-job communication, promotion, and team work. The latter group is most likely to use the learning center for skill refinement and additional language training.

INNOVATIVE FEATURES OF THE REEP PROJECT

The REEP Workplace Literacy Project contains a number of innovative features that illustrate effective approaches to workplace literacy. Programs serving foreign-born employees, as well as those serving native speakers of English can benefit from similar approaches:

- Joint efforts between industry and REEP to reach out to potential employees maximizes awareness of workplace literacy opportunities. REEP's development of a recruitment handbook for industry representatives who want to market workplace literacy to their employees helps establish industry as another source of information on educational opportunities. REEP's efforts to develop outreach strategies that target low-literate adults shows great promise in reaching the "hard to reach and difficult to serve" population that is most likely to benefit from workplace literacy programs.

- The consortium approach used by REEP leads to greater awareness of the need for workplace literacy in a particular geographic area; promotes capacity building and leads to new programs being created and old programs being adopted by industry.

- The range of industries served by REEP encompasses a broad scope of workplace education sites to include hospitals, nursing homes, hotels, convenience stores and office buildings. Although quite distinct in some aspects, these sites provide customer services and share a focus on the need for effective English skills and cross-communication skills among people who speak different languages.

- The combination of on-site classes and Learning Center involvement promotes ongoing education and fosters independent learning. The Learning Center concept is particularly promising for learners who have achieved a threshold level of English proficiency that allows them to work independently. The approach appears less successful with learners who have only minimal English, have complicated lives that do not allow them to attend center or sessions, or are not confident enough in their own abilities to learn independently.

- The cable television project is both innovative and educationally sound. By showing actual workplace situations, the video segments take full advantage of the visual possibilities that video offers. The lessons maximize communication skill development by integrating **language use** (simulation of communicative situations reflecting language and literacy on the job), **language development** (acquisition of structures and key vocabulary items), and **language practice** (opportunities to use certain structures and vocabulary in controlled situations).

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The evaluation activities undertaken by the project clearly show that participants as well as supervisors considered the program a success (see project final report). The project has met or exceeded all of its goals, and only encountered one major difficulty when stakeholders failed to see eye to eye on the purpose of instruction and a class had to be cancelled. This section discusses program impacts and then moves on to examine the challenges the program has faced. Finally, it reports on the results of focus group meetings with learners and selected industry representatives.

Summary of Project Outcome Data

The project used multiple indicators to assess learner progress and measure program impacts. Measures included pre- and post testing of learners, as well as documentation that key competencies had been achieved, along with supervisor ratings. The program also tracked retention rates, which ranged from 100% in participating hospitals to 77% in nursing homes, and attendance rates, which showed a span of 94% attendance in the hospitals to 74% in the Southland 7-11 Corporation. Supervisor approval ratings ranged from 63% for office and apartment management contractors to a high of 93% for the hospitals. Progress reports, based on pre- and post testing and competency achievement showed that the group that received the lowest approval rating from the supervisors (office management) showed the greatest progress in language and literacy achievement (89%). Other progress results clustered around the high 80 range as well, with the lowest progress (82%) reported by the nursing home program. (For a discussion of progress achievement, attendance and retention rates and supervisor approval ratings, see the Project Final Report.) In future grants, the project might explore even further which factors influence supervisor ratings and examine more closely what kind of progress is seen as most significant by the participating industries.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

The REEP project has experienced many of the same challenges that face other workplace literacy projects. In an effort to deal with these challenges, REEP has developed a number of promising approaches that are worth considering in other programs as well:

Establishing Strong Partnerships

Since managers and supervisors don't always see the literacy program as a priority, developing a good working relationship with industry presents one of the greatest challenges for educational agencies. As a result, joint decision making and team evaluations are difficult to plan and carry out. Supervisors may see the time it takes to provide input and give feedback as intrusive and may resent employees leaving work to attend class.

REEP has tried to set up effective partnerships through a two-pronged approach that includes gently pushing for ongoing involvement of all industry partners and adapting its practices to the business environment. REEP also holds ongoing meetings with consortium partners to build greater levels of awareness both among the partners who are offering programs and among those who are slowly realizing the benefits that can be gained from offering on-site English classes.

The consortium meetings help the program to develop a framework for meeting the needs of the various service industries and allow non-participating partners a good sense of what workplace literacy can and cannot accomplish. Being able to talk to other managers helps these industries to decide whether instituting a workplace literacy program for their foreign-born employees is desirable.

Obtaining Effective Input and Useful Feedback

Successful literacy audits are often much more difficult to accomplish than indicated in the literature. Managers and supervisors are often at a loss when asked to list the kind of language and literacy skills that are needed for successful job performance since employees are reported as doing a fine job at present. Skills upgrading is needed for restructuring (one hotel is moving toward a team approach), to move up work on the floor to supervisory positions, or to deal with new technology. Since managers and supervisors are not sure what new skills will be needed, their initial input into the curriculum needs to be supplemented by other means.

Similarly, asking supervisors to monitor learner progress or provide feedback on the impact of the program on workplace performance provides quite a challenge. Supervisors recognize significant changes in employee behavior, but are not always able to articulate more subtle changes in terms of the language competencies that the program has outlined. Yet the support

of the first line supervisors is crucial for the success of the program. As one manager (at a different program) has phrased it: "Supervisor buy-in, that's where the rubber hits the road."

Since supervisors are very busy, they often resent having to come to meetings to discuss needs assessment data or report on program successes. As a result, regular group meetings are difficult to arrange and schedules are often changed at the last minute. Written surveys asking supervisors to comment on how employee performance has changed as a result of the program may act as good indicators of the supervisors' satisfaction with the program, but may be weak indicators of actual learner progress since survey results often lack reliability.

REEP has developed several strategies for obtaining valuable input and useful feedback from industry. Industry partners are presented with a framework that list the workplace competencies that can be taught and are asked to prioritize these competencies and add to the list. Getting a sense of what the contents of a class might look like helps these partners to imagine what employees might learn in a class.

The program also tries to build ongoing support from first line supervisors. Teachers are encouraged to stay in touch with supervisors and inform them about the skills covered in class (by talking to them in person or by leaving notes), and the workplace liaison spends a great deal of time, stopping by to chat with supervisors to keep them abreast of program changes and making them aware that their input is valued.

Designing a Comprehensive Curriculum Framework

Given the varied perspectives on workplace literacy education, it is often difficult to negotiate among the various expectations of the stakeholders. Programs must find an appropriate balance between the mandates of the federal workplace literacy program, which require a functional context curriculum, the expectations of industry representatives who want projects to teach employees whatever it takes to do their job right and become trainable, and the needs of learners, many of whom want to learn the kind of general English that helps them to communicate in all settings, not just the workplace.

Getting specific learner input into the kind of workplace communication skills they most need on their job presents an additional challenge since many beginning learners have difficulties analyzing their work situation or articulating their specific needs beyond generalities, such as "I need to know more English." The challenges are particularly great at the lower levels, where learners do need to develop their general language proficiency while acquiring workplace specific vocabulary and workplace related functional competencies.

Since contexts differ from work site to work site (although language and literacy needs may be similar), a functional context curriculum demands a customized curriculum. Developing curricula that reflect the local contexts while meshing learner needs with industry

expectations requires a great deal of expertise and can be very time consuming. To be workable on a program-wide basis, the individual syllabi developed for each class must be integrated into an overall curriculum framework that effectively links the key components of a well articulated curriculum: (1) needs analysis, (2) instruction, and (3) assessment of learner progress.

The curriculum, in turn, must be integrated into a comprehensive program design that includes (1) curriculum development flexible enough to respond to needs as they occur, (2) teacher education geared toward the goals of the program, (3) program evaluation capable of capturing the impact the program has had. These components need to linked through an effective liaison network that helps ensure that all parts of the program run smoothly.

REEP has done an excellent job in designing curricula that meet the needs of specific industries, including landscaping, health care environmental services and dietary, and nursing assistants. (It also revised a Housekeeping and Food and Beverage Curriculum developed earlier). These curricula were based on input from managers, supervisors, and the students. Teachers synthesized the information and prioritized topics and competencies. Since new information constantly arises, syllabi were adapted as additional communication needs were identified. This has resulted in an emergent curriculum whose details were fleshed out as the teaching went underway. Having a general curriculum in place that could act as a newt to catch and collect new ideas, kept the program from falling into a trap frequently seen in new programs: an "ad hoc" curriculum that lurches from topic to topic and from one activity to another without ever gelling into a coherent whole.

Setting Priorities

Although quite effective in identifying individual communication skills needed for successful job performance, the program has been slightly less successful in linking its curriculum components to some overarching language and literacy goal. More work may be needed in identifying "what counts as success" for industry partners and for the employees themselves. Once identified, these goals can be used as benchmarks that become reflected in the tasks and activities that make up the curriculum. Finally, progress toward achieving these benchmarks can be measured through both learner assessment and impact evaluation.[1]

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[1] It must be noted that REEP is not alone in not having had time to step back and determine what really counts as success in the mind of program staff, supervisors, managers, and the learners themselves. Most workplace literacy programs are so overwhelmed with conducting in-depths needs analyses and developing detailed curricula that the big picture tends to get lost.

STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES TO THE PROJECT

Interviews and focus groups conducted by the outside evaluator confirmed that both industry representatives and managers saw the project as useful, successful, and worthwhile the effort. The following is a review of the responses that learners gave, followed by the impressions that industry representatives offered during an evaluation site visit at the end of the program.

Learner Responses

The focus group at **Arlington Hospital** consisted of seven employees from the housekeeping and food service departments. The group included Spanish speakers from El Salvador and Mexico, as well as a young man from Africa (Eretria) and a woman from Vietnam. The Spanish speaking women had a great deal of difficulty expressing their thoughts in English while the young man from El Salvador was quite fluent. The participant from Eretria and the young woman from Vietnam were able to get their ideas across, although they were by no means proficient. They were, however, able to provide examples of the kind of phrases and functions they had learned. The group was asked to cite ways in which the class had helped them to communicate better at work to discuss unmet needs.

1. Basic skills

   Several of the women, who had probably had no more than 2-5 years of schooling in their home country, cited the following: learning "the letters of the alphabet", "how to write something in English", "parts of the body" (presumably related to illnesses and aches and pains), along with the more general "how to say something in English", and "how to say something right" (pronunciation).

2. Social communication with patients, supervisors and peers

   Participants gave examples of the expressions they had learned to ease communication between employees and patients. They reported learning "how to talk to people...", saying things such as "Good morning. How are you?", "How is your family?", "How was the food?", "How was your weekend?" (Since patients in hospitals and nursing homes often consider those who speak with an accent rude and uncooperative, learning "communication softeners" can help smooth over conversations.)

3. Responding to requests by patients

   One student cited as a major benefit of the class being able to help when patients wanted him to do something, such as when he was asked, "Can you please put my glasses over there?" Other students strongly agreed that this was an important outcome of the class.

4. Understanding job orders

   Participants reported that it was now easier to understand supervisors when they assigned tasks such as "please mop the floor" or "clean the bed". As one woman explained, "We are learning what to do" (in English). Other communication functions that the group found important were "Get food orders ready", "read the menu" and "look at the schedule" (the latter is necessary to understand work assignments).

5. Understanding location of items to be used or fetched

   The women who knew the least English also were proud of being able to understand "where something is", citing the prepositions they had learned, such as "on top" and "under the bed".

6. Achieving greater accuracy

   Effective food service demands a great deal of double checking to ensure that what is on the trays matches the patient requests that have been checked. One student reported that the class had taught them how to "get the right food to the right person", a skill highly valued by the food service department (and the patients), who want employees to double check orders carefully.

The employee focus group at the **Hyatt Hotel** consisted of 6 women from the housekeeping staff. The women came from Asia (Vietnam and Korea), and Central America (El Salvador). All struggled with English but managed to get some key ideas across. In response to questions about what they had learned in the class that helped them with their work, the women provided a number of examples.

1. Linking numbers to schedules

   Several of the women from El Salvador felt that "learning numbers" was important, they mentioned "clock" (telling time), and gave examples related to scheduling ("9:30, start", "lunchtime", and "7 o'clock, go home").

2. Social communication

   Similar to the hospital group, the women who spoke the least English reported that better social communication was an important benefit of the class. When asked what important expressions they had learned, they cited "good morning", "how do you feel?", "thanks", "good-bye", and "good luck".

3. Reporting problems over the phone:

   When asked about phone skills, women cited being able to call in sick as an important accomplishment. (One woman showed a sense of humor by giving the example, "I can't come work, I am look for new job.")

4. Dealing with emergencies

   Even the women who could say very little understood the concept of emergency, reporting that they had learned "call 911", "call police", "call ambulance", and "there's an emergency". Several reported that knowing "parts of the body" was an important skill they had learned in their lessons on dealing with emergencies.

5. Providing directions for hotel guests (to bathroom or meeting room)

   Several of the women who were not able to say much seemed proud of being able to respond to guests requesting directions. They cited newly learned expressions such as "turn right", "turn left", and "go straight" when asked where rest rooms or meeting rooms are located.

6. Explaining location of items

   Similar to the hospital group, the hotel class felt that learning prepositions had helped them to understand where items were located and explain location to others. New expressions they had learned included "behind", "in front of", and "turn around".

7. Recognizing and responding to requests; social communication with customers

   The women also saw better communication with guests as an important accomplishment. They reported having learned requests such as "I want more...", "set of towels", "need soap", and social gambits such as saying "good morning" and "you're welcome".

8. Understanding pay checks

   The woman also reported that the class had taught them how to understand their paychecks. They cited "pay taxes", and knowing "where money goes" as important accomplishments.

Learner Perceptions of Unmet Needs

When the two groups were asked whether there was anything that they had not learned, or what kind of English they wanted to learn more of, they cited the following:

Basic English

The women who spoke only little English wanted more practice with the "letters of the alphabet" while other learners wanted more pronunciation practice so they could "speak the right way" and more listening comprehension "to understand better". A large number of participants wanted "more words" and a greater emphasis on vocabulary building. One woman suggested that the group should learn more special words like "choking". Some of the higher level students also reported wanting more grammar. The young man from Eretria felt strongly that the group needed to know when to use present tense and past tense so they could learn "to say things right".

Everyday English and English for Social Communication Outside of Work

The hotel group in particular wanted more everyday English that would help them "to go to the store" and "to talk to people". One woman mentioned wanting to tell her co-workers and her neighbors about her family, particularly about her new grandson. The hospital group reported as well wanting more English for wider social communication, "to talk to neighbors", "to go to the store", and "to complain when something is not right".

English for Self-Defense

Both groups wanted more of the kind of English that would allow them to claim their rights, including finding ways to talk to the police or to supervisors. As one participant said, the group needed "to say things we want to say" (to authority figures). At the hotel, the group listened with great interest as one woman took several minutes to explain, in fractured English, her frustration over having been given a ticket for what she considered an entirely legal U-turn. Another women used the reading of the vacation schedule as an example of wanting to learn expressions such as "not fair" when schedules for time off seemed inequitable.

More Time to Study English

The strongest response from the groups had to do with wanting to learn more English. The less proficient participants in particular wanted "more classes", "longer classes", and "more English". They explained, "we don't know enough (yet)", and "we need more practice". Several of the Spanish speaking women said they needed the class to "practice English". They were able to communicate in both the hotel and the hospital in Spanish, since both places employ bilingual supervisors. However, the class provides them with a sheltered environment and a safe atmosphere to practice English, since their skills are too low to communicate with "native speakers" on the outside.

Comments

Although participants had difficulties expressing themselves in English, their examples showed that they were acquiring at least some of the communication skills that are critical in the service industry. By learning and using the language necessary to greet customers, understand and respond to requests, report emergencies, and maintain positive social relationships within the group, they met the expectations that employers in the service industry have for their employees.

Both groups expressed the need for more basic skills (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and for "everyday English". While the Department of Education has made it clear that the teaching of non-contextualized basic skills, such as grammar and pronunciation, should not be taught within a workplace context, the feeling of the women should be respected. It might be possible to devote a few minutes each week to "language awareness" activities that demonstrate the patterns that govern language use at work (e.g., discussions of past tense and present tense in relationship to work with optional work sheets provided for those who want to study English at home). Similarly, 5-10 minutes a week can be devoted to "practicing difficult hotel words", thus helping the women to build their vocabulary and gain confidence in being able to "say things right". The need for "self-defense" English is trickier to deal with since instructors who teach students how to claim their rights are sometimes considered "troublemakers" by employers. Curriculum content that deals with effective ways of making one's voice heard in the workplace should be developed through a team approach that includes learners, teachers, supervisors and managers.

Some everyday English could be taught, not as an end in itself, but as a bridge to more sophisticated workplace language. Teachers can help learners understand the relationship between the information that they might seek outside of work ("Can you tell me where the rest rooms are?") and the requests that guests make at the hotel. Similarly, the numbers used in describing weights and amounts of cleaning products used at work can be linked to buying such products for oneself in the store. Since research in literacy development (Wrigley and Guth, 1992) has shown that learning is accelerated when new information is linked to familiar experiences, including some everyday English in the workplace curriculum can strengthen efforts to develop effective employment related communication skills. The matter should, however, first be cleared with the Department of Education.

Responses from Industry Representatives

To gauge the responses of employers to the program, a one hour focus group meeting was held with industry representatives. Representatives from Southland Corporation, Alexandria Hospital, Embassy Suites Hotels, and Marriott Corporation attended the meeting. All were involved in either Human Resource Development or were in charge of training at their sites. No supervisors of the employees who attended the training were present, nor were their managers.

Benefits of the Workplace Literacy Program

The group was very positive in their evaluation of the program. The benefits listed included:

- Opportunities for employees to improve their English by getting engaged in work related language and literacy tasks. This was seen as especially significant for employees who worked in bilingual environments that allowed them to communicate only in Spanish.

- A chance to use English in a sheltered, supportive environment. Employees seldom have an opportunity to think about what they want to say or to reflect on the language forms that the supervisors use, because they are always under pressure to understand and complete job tasks. The class allows participants to think about the English that occurs in their jobs.

- Sustained exposure to American English. Many work environments have employees from different countries working together. Although English is often the "lingua franca", or language of wider communication, employees hear accented English more often than they hear American English. Hearing teachers talk to them and explain things to them slowly helps employees to tune their ears to the sounds and subtleties used by native English speakers.

- Acquisition of vocabulary necessary for effective work performance. Although employees know the English words for items they use every day, they often lack the subtechnical vocabulary that is necessary to understand words such as "urgent" or "inventory".

The group agreed that the greatest benefits of the program was the increased confidence that learners had gained in using English on the job. According to the group, participants now (1) took greater initiative and asked more questions; (2) spoke up more freely and double checked information; and (3) were more likely to express their concerns and opinions.

Focus group participants also responded to the question, "What challenges do you face in working with foreign-born employees, and how has the Arlington Workplace literacy program helped you to meet that challenge?" The following is a summary of these responses.

Ongoing Challenges as Perceived by Industry

The group spent a great deal of time discussing the ongoing need for the program. They gave examples of the difficulties that foreign-born employees face in the service industry and provided suggestions on how the Arlington Workplace Literacy Program might deal with some of these challenges. In the view of these representatives, "we in the service industry

have a lot of problems with foreign-born employees". These problems fall into several categories:

Failure to Ask Questions or Ask for Clarification

It is often not clear why foreign-born employees don't meet the expectations of their supervisors or managers. The employer group was concerned that employees often say "yes" and yet there is no follow-through. The group was not sure whether the difficulty lay in not understanding the task or request (along with a failure to ask for clarification), or not knowing how to solve the problem. The group felt that English language training was needed to encourage employees to ask questions and explain what they are going to do, so that supervisors and managers can be sure that tasks have been understood.

Incomplete Understanding of Safety Procedures

One participant expressed concerns over safety, particularly in the area of janitorial services. Many foreign-born employees don't understand the need to wear a mask when working with chemicals or gloves when working with caustic materials. Reading and understanding safety labels was a particular concern. Others agreed that developing an understanding of the vocabulary and concepts that are critical for understanding OSHA mandated safety training was a strong need.

Inadequate Understanding of Forms and Schedules

According to several participants, many of the employees don't understand the resources that are available to them. For example, one employee did not fill out a sick pay sheet (and did not get paid), because she did not know "how the form works". Others mentioned that foreign-born employees had a particularly hard time understanding policies and procedures. The group agreed that more English classes were needed to help foreign-born employees deal with various forms (some of the responsibility for orienting employees may have to go to industry)

Speaking a "Different Kind of English"

Several of the Southland employees were born in countries such as India and Pakistan where English is the official language (one of the official languages) and rightly think of themselves as "native speakers of English". Yet, their accents are often such that U.S. Americans cannot understand them ("Marlboro's" represents a particular difficulty). As one trainer put it "We can't say 'you don't speak English', we must say 'you're not familiar yet with American English.'" In addition, many employees

either get extremely nervous when giving presentations to a larger group, or go on with their presentations, oblivious to the fact that the audience cannot understand them.

Several participants mentioned "tone" as a factor that can inhibit communication and cost goodwill. They pointed out that sometimes foreign-born employees use an intonation pattern that strikes U.S. customers as "rude". A customer who listens to a clerk from India explain the location of an item (using Indian English intonation) might brand that employee as "uncooperative". The group agreed that dealing with "tone" and other issues of social appropriateness might be worth discussing in some of the classes.

Unprepared for the Workplace of the Future

The group felt that strong reading and writing skills were necessary if foreign-born employees were to move up into supervisory positions. Clear, comprehensible face to face communication along with strong oral presentation skills were also critical.

Several participants mentioned that foreign-born employees needed to be prepared for changes in workplace restructuring so that they would not be left behind. One participant presented an example from changes that have taken place in their housekeeping department. Housekeepers now work as a team and use a collaborative approach to decision making. Peer reviews are used to decide on incentives and make hiring decisions. The housekeepers themselves decide what the criteria for hiring should be, and they interview prospective employees. ("They look at someone and decide, 'can she do 18 rooms and not drag down the team?'") This innovation has resulted in less turnover.

The group felt that a workplace literacy program can help foreign-born employees develop the language skills necessary for a successful team approach. Workplace literacy could also help develop the cultural knowledge necessary to understand concepts such as "non-discrimination".

The Need for Strong Industry Involvement

All participants of the employer focus group agreed that workplace literacy must be an integral part of the training benefits an industry provides. Some employers are moving in that direction. Embassy Suites, for example, uses a series of picture cards in their training that include key phrases in English and in Spanish. Southland Corporation is starting to offer employee training via video and is considering developing a "cross-cultural component". The company might develop training manuals in both English and Spanish.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

By all accounts, the REEP workplace literacy project is a full success. It serves as an effective model for building collaborations between educational providers and associations on the one hand, and between ESL programs and individual work sites on the other. The experience of having to cancel one class (due to lack of a common understanding of program goals between supervisors and employees) illustrates the need for shared expectations.

The project deserves credit for putting a special emphasis on offering classes for employees who are difficult to serve, namely women in housekeeping who speak very little English and have few academic skills. The basic English training the project provided offered these women the opportunity to improve their English. They will need much more English before they can quality for a better job. In an insecure economy, they might even lose their jobs (Virginia is a right to work state).

While some of these women might go on to develop further English skills on their own, most will need more classes before they reach a threshold level that allows them to learn English independently. Providing additional opportunities for learning for these employees constitutes a challenge for both the project and its industry partners.

Recommendations

The challenges that the project has faced underscores the fact that communication skills training in the workplace requires a strong commitment from all partners. It also points to the need for first line supervisors and workplace managers (not just HRD personnel) to become more closely involved in all aspects of workplace literacy. As the educational agency, REEP can play a key role in helping industry to build a comprehensive, well articulated program. This can be accomplished by a combination of the following components:

(1) A workplace literacy model that integrates communication skills training for foreign-born employees into the overall training efforts that industry partners presently provide.

(2) An evaluation framework that focuses on what counts as effective communication from the perspective of supervisors, learners, and managers. Such a framework should include the benchmarks for success that all stakeholders feel committed to.

(3) An on-site planning team that involves program staff, supervisors, and selected employees in fine tuning and implementing the evaluation framework (employees need not be participants of the program, but should be able to act as liaisons to actual and potential participants).

(4) A commitment by industry to make effective cross-cultural communication an integral part of all of its training efforts. This may include workshops on dealing with diversity for supervisors or including criteria related to cross-cultural communication in the performance reviews of all employees working in a multi-lingual environment. (Sustained attention by industry to cross-cultural issues will also provide the field with much needed data on the effectiveness of workplace literacy programs designed for multi-lingual work places.)

While programs such as REEP can indeed act as a catalyst for learning for the several hundred employees it has served, the dual goals of full proficiency in English and successful integration into the U.S. workplace can only be achieved through ongoing and sustained efforts by all partners.